

## **Sustainable Environment for Quality of Life (SEQL)**

Techniques: early involvement and implementation, learning together/jointly developing the information base for decision making, facilitated issue discussions that built consensus across jurisdictional lines

Sustainable Environment for Quality of Life, or SEQL, is a federal-state-local partnership designed to enhance the quality of life for residents in the fifteen-county Greater Charlotte-Rock Hill-Gastonia-Concord Bi-State Region in North Carolina and South Carolina (Greater Charlotte Bi-State Region). Through SEQL, local officials have worked with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the states of North Carolina and South Carolina to help support ongoing efforts to make the Greater Charlotte Bi-State Region environmentally cleaner, more livable for its residents, and a more attractive area for businesses to locate.

SEQL's focus is on both voluntary local government action to address environmental concerns, and on incorporating environmental concerns in local decision-making throughout the region. Through the leadership of Centralina and Catawba Regional Councils of Governments, elected officials, citizens, and businesses are working together to address a range of issues associated with rapid growth and urban and suburban sprawl. SEQL also has helped bring federal and state resources to bear in helping local officials address environmental challenges. It has proven to be a model of collaboration across local governments and three levels of government – federal, state and local – that other areas can adopt as they confront quality of life and environmental challenges associated with rapid growth.

Because the Greater Charlotte Bi-State Region -- with a growing population of 2.3 million people -- is a highly desirable place to live, SEQL's approach is to address the region's challenges of rapid growth by:

- Offering local governments the opportunity to work with each other to build cooperation and collaboration
- Providing a forum to develop policies and approaches to address the challenges posed by rapid growth
- Providing implementation assistance to local governments on environmental "commitment action items," with actual implementation funded by the local governments themselves or through grants they have sought.

The EPA Sustainability Project – SEQL's predecessor – was started in the fall of 2000 under the leadership of Charlotte Mayor Patrick McCrory and Mecklenburg County Commission Chairman Parks Helms. Under an EPA cooperative agreement with the City of Charlotte and with support from Centralina COG, the city brought together the region's chief elected and appointed officials from twenty-six of the largest jurisdictions to learn about air quality, water resources and land-use issues. Centralina COG and other staff developed action item toolboxes for air, water and land use that were presented to elected officials. The officials identified twenty-five air, water and land use action items from the toolboxes for consideration at the local level that they believed would work best for their communities. The Sustainability Project was a success, and helped foster a collective sense that more work needed to be done as a region by successfully engaging key officials and bringing them "up to speed" on critical environmental issues.

Following this, in 2001, EPA approached Charlotte and other local governments and the States of North and South Carolina about expanding the established partnership, to an integrated approach to address air quality, transportation, land-use planning, energy and economic development, and other environmental issues. In October 2002, EPA announced the continued EPA partnership with the

governments of the Charlotte metro area. The partnership was established through a three-year cooperative agreement with Centralina COG. Centralina, sub-contracting with its South Carolina counterpart, Catawba Regional Council of Governments, officially launched SEQL in March 2003.

Based on the SEQL experience, local communities interested in developing regional environmental programs should consider:

- Identifying a local champion
- Engaging a respected regional organization to manage the effort
- Developing a multi-year, reliable source of funding
- Being prepared for a long-term commitment
- Developing a regional vision
- Celebrating early successes
- Developing a marketing strategy to maintain community involvement
- Developing partnerships
- Enhancing participation by providing options for involvement
- Identifying and develop staff who are committed to action

SEQL participants and EPA have learned many lessons, including:

- Identify successes by early adopters
- Focus on action through choice
- Connect people
- Communicate, communicate, communicate
- Be aware of many factors affecting community participation
- Communicating about how data will be used is critical
- Communicating technical information to non-technical audiences is a challenge

SEQL has achieved significant results. As of April 2007, sixty-seven jurisdictions have become formal SEQL partners, and eighty-seven jurisdictions across the fifteen county regions had self-reported implementation of 807 actions in four areas: air quality, water quality, and sustainable growth. The COGs jointly developed “how-to” guidance documents to implement these action items. SEQL has established a common database for the region to support development and evaluation of future regional scenarios. The COGs, working with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and EPA’s Regional Vulnerability Assessment or ReVA program, successfully created a regional data system framework designed to support baseline and ongoing data collection. SEQL is developing a unified vision for the region that is expected to have buy-in from the majority of local governments and provide a basis for continuing discussions about growth and sustainability beyond SEQL. Finally, through SEQL the COGs have made great strides in promoting regional integrated planning so that it becomes an ongoing and customary activity.

For more information, visit [www.seql.org](http://www.seql.org) or <http://www.epa.gov/air/toxicair/charlotte.html> or contact Rebecca Yarbrough, SEQL Program Administrator, Centralina COG, [ryarbrough@centralina.org](mailto:ryarbrough@centralina.org), or Chris Stoneman, USEPA, [stoneman.chris@epa.gov](mailto:stoneman.chris@epa.gov).